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Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its seventy-third session

Draft report

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Chapter III
General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the representatives of Egypt (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), El Salvador (on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), Paraguay (on behalf of the Group of Friends of Spanish), the Russian Federation, Nepal, Morocco, Algeria, Argentina, China, Ukraine, Senegal, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Thailand, Azerbaijan, the Republic of Korea, the United States of America, Portugal, Chile, Japan, Cuba, Pakistan, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Israel, Brazil (on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries), Armenia, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jamaica, Paraguay, Liberia and South Africa; as well as by the observers for the European Union, the State of Palestine and the International Organization of la Francophonie.

2. The general debate was preceded by a statement by the Chair of the Committee, Jan Kickert (Austria). The Chair observed that the media landscape was undergoing ever more rapid change, from the simple provision of information to complex forms of multidimensional interaction. People wished not merely to be informed as a whole, but rather to participate individually; to provide and receive feedback; to propose, debate and decide; and to contribute immediately to shaping their world through shared discourse. The Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, Alison Smale, also made a statement and responded to comments by and queries from Member States.

3. In addressing the substantive issues before the Committee, representatives addressed United Nations public information policies and activities in the context of national and international perspectives on communications and the global media landscape. Recurrent topics, among others, included communications campaigns

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carried out by the Department of Public Information; multilingualism and the use of official as well as local languages; webcasting and meetings coverage; the use of traditional as well as new media; the relevance of United Nations information centres; the importance of youth as a target audience; and reform of the Department.

4. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, commended communication campaigns of the Department on the Sustainable Development Goals, human rights, the need for climate action, eliminating violence against women and press freedom, among others. Numerous speakers highlighted their productive cooperative relations with the Department in such campaigns. One representative called upon the Department to continue to focus on the needs of Africa. Other speakers underscored the contributions of the Department in providing objective and credible information on global issues such as poverty eradication, climate change, human rights and disarmament, among others.

5. The question of multilingualism remained a priority for many delegations. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, underscored the importance of multilingualism for effectively informing the public about the work of the United Nations and garnering its support, and called for parity in the use of official languages in the creation as well as the dissemination of public information material. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, noted the importance of Spanish as the second most widely spoken language in the world and the second most widely used on United Nations websites and in other products, and said that the evident interest of Spanish-speaking peoples in the work of the United Nations required the Department to respond accordingly, including in staffing decisions. Numerous representatives praised the Department for producing materials in all official languages, as well as Kiswahili and Portuguese, along with local languages. Several speakers noted that better mainstreaming of multilingualism in the information and communications activities of the United Nations would increase the efficacy, accountability and transparency of the Organization. The amount and quality of information on websites and social media in all official languages should be comparable. Other delegations pointed out a need for the aim of multilingualism to be accomplished in a cost-neutral manner using existing resources. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, expressed continued concerns about disparity among official languages as used in public information material.

6. Numerous delegations expressed the need for having archived webcasts available in all official languages. Others articulated their abiding concerns about the continued lack of availability of press releases in all official languages. In that context, other speakers remarked on the dangers of disinformation and "fake" news, including that there should be no restrictions on the dissemination of United Nations original content and that the Department should keep up its efforts to counter disinformation. One representative observed that the Department's new websites had become more user-friendly, modern and public-oriented sources of information. Several representatives confirmed the usefulness of the UN News smartphone application.

7. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, emphasized the importance of maintaining the use of traditional media, such as television, radio and print, in order to reach large populations, including those without access to the Internet, and expressed concerns that the digital divide between developed and developing countries continued to widen. Several speakers observed that while new media offered opportunities to expand the Organization's scope and reach, traditional media, particularly radio, remained effective and must continue to be used in order to reach the widest possible audience, and called for a balance in the use by the Department of its different communications tools.

8. Numerous speakers, including those representing large groups, acclaimed the fundamental role of the United Nations information centres in mobilizing support for the work of the United Nations around the world by engaging local audiences, including through the use of official as well as local languages. Any rationalization of United Nations information centres should be undertaken on a case-by-case basis. Several representatives called for the strengthening of support for the United Nations information centres.

9. The importance of reaching out to youth in communicating the aims and ideals of the United Nations was underscored by several representatives, including those representing large groups.

10. While expressing support for renaming the Department of Public Information the "Department of Global Communications", as well as for its reform, numerous speakers, including those representing large groups, stated that such reform should take into account the priorities established by the Committee on Information, including multilingualism, and must include consultations with Member States. One delegation emphasized that reform should not lead to the elimination of communications tools that had proven to be effective. Another delegation stressed that reform should be implemented in a cost-neutral manner.

11. While a number of delegations voiced their support for the Special Information Programme on the Question of Palestine, other delegations expressed the view that it offered a biased and misleading narrative of the situation in the region. Several speakers, including those representing large groups, commended the Department on its training programme for Palestinian journalists.

12. Several speakers emphasized that communications must always be compatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, especially the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of States. One delegation emphasized that United Nations operations and communications should go hand in hand, with words and deeds complementing each other.

13. A representative of a large group acknowledged the importance of strategic alliances with civil society, academia and the private sector for amplifying United Nations messaging. Several representatives recognized the United Nations Academic Impact for the work that it had done to engage academic and research communities around the world in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as in promoting global citizenship, human rights and tolerance to counter violent extremism. Other representatives expressed support for the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme and the Remember Slavery programme. One delegation expressed particular appreciation for the work of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.

14. Responding to comments by and queries from Member States, the Under-Secretary-General stated that the need to tell the United Nations story more compellingly and to shape the narrative more effectively informed ongoing efforts to effect changes in the Department's conduct of its responsibilities. She gave her assurances that where reform might involve specific products or services or the adjustment of respective expenditures, the Department would report to the General Assembly through the appropriate bodies for its consideration. In addition, she underscored her intention to continue the practice of informally briefing members of the Committee. The Under-Secretary-General emphasized that the information provided by the Department had to be accurate, impartial, comprehensive, balanced, timely and relevant, as well as multilingual. She noted that the budget proposal for the biennium 2018–2019 had sought additional resources of $4.2 million to enable the Department to meet some requests for multilingualism, but that those resources had not been approved and the Department had experienced additional budget

reductions. Nonetheless, she averred that the Department would continue to pursue multilingualism by using its talented human resources and taking advantage of opportunities afforded by technological tools and partnerships with language schools and universities. With respect to the websites of different Secretariat departments, whose authors were responsible for content, the Department had assisted other sites to achieve a minimum level of multilingualism where possible within existing resources. The 158 websites directly under the Department's purview, along with the websites of the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and their main committees, however, were fully maintained in the six official languages. While the Department had established social media teams in each of the official languages, as well as in Kiswahili and Portuguese, in view of the importance of social networks as a new communications tool, it remained fully committed to the production of audio, video and print to reach audiences with different capacities and of different generations. The Under-Secretary-General also announced that, beginning in 2019, the Department would work within a July-to-December time frame for its reports to the Committee on Information and a January-to-June time frame for reports to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, towards ensuring a coherent and comprehensive narrative of its work.